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EDUCATION IN RURAL AMERICA--ARE WE DOING THE JOB.

BY- ISENBERG, ROBERT M.

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ALTHOUGH RURAL EDUCATION HAS MANY ADVANTAGES, AMERICAN RURAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS ARE NOT CAPITALIZING UPON THE OPPORTUNITIES AFFORDED THEM. WHILE MANY RURAL SCHOOLS HAVE NOT KEPT UP WITH THE CHANGES THAT HAVE OCCURRED IN THE PAST TWO DECADES, MOST DO HAVE LIBRARIES AND LABORATORIES. HOWEVER, THE MAJORITY IS NOT SERVED BY SPECIALIZED CLASSES IN VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION, PROGRAMS FOR BLIND OR DEAF STUDENTS, LEARNING CENTERS, OR TEACHERS WHO ARE INQUISITIVE ENOUGH TO EXPLORE NEW AND DIFFERENT INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES TO PROVIDE MORE MEANINGFUL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES. MANY TIMES RURAL AREAS DO NOT BENEFIT FROM HIGH QUALITY TEACHERS BECAUSE THESE TEACHERS ARE LURED AWAY BY MORE DESIRABLE WAGES AND LIVING CONDITIONS IN URBAN AREAS. ALL OF THESE REASONS, PLUS THE FACT THAT MOST RURAL SCHOOLS DO NOT HAVE A KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM, LEAD TO RURAL STUDENTS' DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL AT AN EARLY AGE. CONSEQUENTLY, RURAL YOUTH ARE NOT BEING PREPARED TO MEET THE DEMANDS OF THEIR FUTURE ENVIRONMENTS. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL OUTLOOK CONFERENCE ON RURAL YOUTH, OCTOBER 24, 1967, WASHINGTON, D. C., SPONSORED JOINTLY BY THE U. S. DEPARTMENTS OF AGRICULTURE, HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE, INTERIOR, AND LABOR, OEO, AND THE PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL ON YOUTH OPPORTUNITY. (CL)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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EDUCATION IN RURAL AMERICA: ARE WE DOING THE JOB?

Robert M. Isenberg
Director, Division of Rural Services
National Education Association
Washington, D. C.

Education in rural America, as in any other place, is the process by which the young are inducted into full membership in society. The formal portion of this process has been institutionalized by its legal assignment to our state systems of schools. The question raised is whether or not the schools presently available to rural children and youth are performing this task in at least a satisfactory and adequate way. More specifically, are they providing rural young people with the knowledge, understanding, and skills they need to become productive and contributing members of whatever community they may become a part? Are the schools developing in them such understanding of society's traditions, norms, and values as will permit them to find satisfaction and fulfillment as they adjust and adopt to ever changing configurations of circumstances?

It would be comforting if these questions could be answered with a resounding "Yes" and indeed there are some rural communities where the job being done fully deserves a positive response. But we are a nation of diversity, and many times more are the communities where the educational programs available for rural youth fall far short of what must be done. The best answer to the topic question, then, is neither a clear-cut "Yes" or "No" but rather something more like "In some places," "To some extent," or "For some rural youth."

Educational programs, as they exist today, are the result of a long and slow evolution. The direction has been one of continuous forward progress. More children, both in numbers and as a proportion of the total number, are attending school now than at any previous time in our history. And they stay in school longer. They also have an opportunity to select from a much broader range of offerings. The result is that there is now a higher level of educational attainment among rural youth, among all youth, than has ever before been true.

Schools offering programs of both elementary and secondary education are available to virtually every child, no matter where he lives. There are schools in mining towns, fishing villages, lumber camps, on islands, in isolated canyons, in areas where there is a complete absence

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of any kind of local government, and even in places not yet served by roads. We have achieved, almost without exception, universal access to schools.

Unfortunately the question "Are our schools doing the job?" implies more than access. It suggests questions about the appropriateness and the quality of the educational programs provided. But here, too, we can count some significant achievements. Education throughout nearly all of rural America has experienced a substantial overhaul during the past two decades, both in structure and in program. No longer is it the education of the "Little Red Schoolhouse." The rural school today, more typically, is a modern consolidated school. Its students come each morning wherever they live on a bright yellow school bus. They have access to libraries, laboratories, music programs, and other special programs and facilities unlike anything available in rural areas a few years ago. There have been more substantial changes in the legal or governmental structure for education than has taken place at community, county, or state level for any other area of public activity.

There are places where rural youth do have access to and are able to participate in and benefit from some highly specialized educational services and programs.

* Some rural youth are receiving high level vocational and technical preparation. They can make choices. Depending upon their particular interests and competencies they can elect to prepare themselves for work in chemical technology, air conditioning, radio and TV repair, barbering, meat cutting, auto mechanics, retailing, and a host of other areas.
* Some rural youth who are deaf or hard of hearing are taught lip reading or assisted by mechanical hearing devices. Some of the blind children in rural areas are able to receive most of their instruction in a regular classroom with other children supplemented with assistance with braile and with special problems.
* Some rural youth attend schools that have developed learning centers equipped with a wide variety of films, tapes, records, and other communications materials which permit them to pursue special interests independently and to become self-directing in their studies.
* Some rural youth attend schools where the faculty is hard at work exploring different kinds of instructional approaches which seem to have promise for more meaningful educational experiences.

Unfortunately, only <u>some</u> rural youth have these opportunities. A majority attend schools which may well be housed in relatively new buildings but where the instruction offered has changed very little and where the specialized and supporting programs and services are completely absent.

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Somehow our schools in rural areas have been unable to capitalize on their inherent strengths and advantages. Smaller school systems do have advantages. They seldom have the large and overcrowded conditions we hear so much about. The teachers in these schools do know their students on a close and personal basis. They know where they live, their parents, their brothers and sisters, and just about all that can be known. Nor is the bureaucratic red tape characteristic of large school systems a handicapping circumstance. Our smaller schools have a chance for a degree of flexibility that larger school systems should envy. And added to these assets is close and ready access to a limitless array of nature and outdoor resources which are seldom utilized in their instructional programs.

Part of the difficulty rural schools face is directly related to the special problems they have in staffing. There once was a time when nearly every beginning teacher started out in a rural school. But that circumstance dissappeared completely at the outset of World War II. For twenty-five years rural America has competed poorly for qualified teaching talent. They have competed even more poorly for the outstanding and gifted teachers. When they have had the good fortune to attract outstanding people, they are quickly identified and lured away by more competitive school systems. Currently our schools in rural areas have a significantly disproportionate share of all those teaching with some type of provisional or substandard credentials.

Not all the fault for this inability to attract and hold a competent and qualified teaching staff resides in the school system itself. One of the major factors causing schools in rural areas to compete poorly in the market for teachers is the general absence in many small communities of adequate or even decent housing. Unsatisfactory living conditions are more likely to keep good teachers away than are circumstances more closely related to the job itself. There is also, all too often, a kind of community apathy that seems not really to care much whether teachers are fully qualified or even whether or not the outstanding teachers are retained.

An assessment of rural education today shows other shortcomings. There is increasing evidence pointing to the importance of the early years in a child's educational development, for example. Yet a majority of all rural schools do not provide kindergarden programs. And education at nursery school level is almost nonexistent in rural communities. There are still nearly half a million children in families of migratory agricultural workers receiving very little education. And the proportion of rural youth who fail to complete a high school level education far exceeds the national average. It has been well documented that the greatest incident of drop-outs is at both extremes of the range--in the inner-city and in rural areas.

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In terms of whether our schools are doing an appropriate job in serving rural youth, the record is not one from which we can derive much satisfaction. While the general level of education in nearly every rural community is far superior to what it was a decade ago, and while individual schools here and there are true lighhouses of quality programs, most schools are not doing nearly well enough to assure rural youth a very bright future. There are some states which are now engaged in genuine efforts to upgrade these programs and what they have set out to do appears to have much promise. Others have completed studies which point the way to achieving expanded opportunities. But there are still a number of states and a large number of rural communities where the major concern seems more to be how they can retain their present inadequate level of education than on how it might be strengthened, updated, and improved.

Schools in rural areas are not doing nearly as well as we know how to do. They are not doing nearly well enough to prepare today's youth for the kinds of demands they will be required to meet. Major improvement efforts are underway. But in too many rural communities the demands and needs are expanding upwards more rapidly then is the present rate of trying to catch up. Schools are doing a job, but the dimensions of the job being done are not quite what is needed and what must be done.